

Talk back: Engaging the enemy

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It has become common in political circles of late to refuse even to talk with one's enemies. President Bush refuses to talk with Syria's president Bashar Assad. Tom DeLay, back on the political scene as a blogger, scoffed when asked to explain why he wouldn't speak with House Democrats: "Why would I speak with the enemy?" In this Manichaean universe, one keeps one's hands unsullied and avoids contact with one's vile antagonist.

A different attitude toward the enemy was evident after radio commentator Don Imus described the Rutgers women's basketball team as so many "nappy-headed hos." The outcry eventually led CBS and MSNBC to fire him. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton led the public hue and cry. Advertisers pulled their support from *Imus in the Morning*. Suddenly a man who had gotten away with calling Colin Powell a "sniffing weasel" and New Mexico governor Bill Richardson a "fat sissy," and who had said U.S. diplomats talking to Saudi Arabian diplomats should "take those towels around their heads and wipe their noses with them," was out of a job. Given Americans' taste for shock jocks, it's likely he'll be back on the air—or someone like him will fill his spot.

But it was the Rutgers players themselves who made the most impressive response. They demanded more than Imus's punishment. They wanted to engage him and tell him how his comments made them feel. They wanted to say how it felt to have their moment of glory—reaching the women's national title game—stolen from them. They wanted to tell him why racist and misogynist language is so painful to hear.

The Rutgers women wanted to introduce themselves to Imus, and in the process they introduced themselves to the world—not just as successful athletes, but as people: Essence Carson is an accomplished musician; Katie Adams was her high school's valedictorian; Epiphanny Prince's accomplishments inspired her mother and grandmother to enroll in college; Matee Ajavon scored 20 points against Duke even though she has a titanium rod inserted in her leg. In the much-circulated photo of the Rutgers team gathered at their press conference, the women looked pained, but

dignified. That spoke volumes about the maturity of this group of college women compared to the juvenile antics of a media star.

The Rutgers women named the wrong, and then engaged their enemy face to face. They worked toward a difficult reconciliation, the kind in which hearts and minds can actually be changed. The team said of the Imus controversy: "We hope that this will serve as a catalyst for change." They did their part, and also showed the rest of us how it can be done. n